

PEELING OFF THE LAYERS

writer Rachael Oakes-Ash

It's New Years Eve 2007 and I've come to detox. Clearly I am mad. So are the other 49 folk who have made their way to Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat for a seven-night detox. Who knew so many preferred to see the New Year in with wheatgrass shots?

DAY ONE

I have left my hometown of Sydney where the sky is blue for the hinterland of Queensland's Gold Coast where the sky is anything but. The forecast doesn't look promising: cyclones, storm warnings, gale force winds and an ever-present downpour. My bags are filled with wafting kaftans, bikinis and sunscreen. I had intended to spend every spare moment reclining by the retreat's two infinity pools. No sugar, no salt, no alcohol, no caffeine, no gluten, no dairy, no red meat, no chicken and now no sun. The week isn't looking promising.

I meet my fellow detoxers at dinner and we're all obsessed by the weather. You'd think we were from England.



DAY TWO

The wake up knock at 5.45am was not pleasant. I haven't slept well, despite my king sized bed and organic cotton sheets. It would appear my days ahead are to be filled with early morning Tai Chi followed by a mountain bush walk but due to the weather we spend the time in the gym doing a spin class or a circuit class before breakfast. I'm tired already just thinking about it.

Breakfast goes well, my fellow revelers are an attractive lot, jovial, fun and interesting. We've all partaken of a mega dose magnesium oral colonic before Tai Chi and have to excuse ourselves throughout the morning as the lining of our intestines flush themselves out. Nice!

There's a lecture this morning on health but my head is filled with thoughts of love. I've come to the retreat hot off the heels of a date – a flirtation with a male that has sent me into a spin. It would appear the weather is against me pounding out my fear of attraction or rejection by running the hills and dales around me. I'm forced to go inward, to reflect, to sit by the fire (in mid summer) and to sit with myself. The program co-coordinator tells me, "the rain is telling you to take this time to work on your soul, to look at your patterns of behaviour, to nurture your inner child."

I look for the closest thing to a crèche and find an architectural masterpiece in the middle of the forest. It's a 30-treatment room spa dedicated to pampering, pummeling and plucking. I think I've found home and I book in for the works: transformational therapy to discover my behaviour patterns, intuitive massage to work my emotions through my physical body, chi nei tsang to get the energy flow in my stomach, a four-hour signature spa ritual and three personal training sessions in case the rain doesn't let up.

The afternoon is spent sobbing on the intuitive massage table as Helen the therapist takes me on a truly sublime journey with native bush flower essences designed to heal my heart chakra, which according to her is screaming.

And New Year's Eve? Who knows what happened. We were all tucked up in bed by 9pm, though I was secretly obsessing what all my friends were up to in Sydney, scared I was missing out.

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DAY THREE

More Tai Chi, more exercise in the gym, more rain. More lectures, this time on exercise, more yoga, more oral magnesium colonic (the last for the week), more pampering.

Today I learn about Yin (I don't have it) and Yang (I have too much of it). I commit to finding my lost Yin and revealing my vulnerability. My fear of rejection has meant I present a resoundingly independent front that says "I don't need you" (that's Yang and masculine) in the hope my prospective lovers don't feel crowded. Instead it doesn't allow people in as I rarely show my softer side (Yin and feminine).

I buy the book *I Need Your Love – Is That True?* by Byron Katie and I can be found asleep on page five by the fire after boxing my personal trainer (too much Yang).



DAY FOUR

It's still raining. In fact, it's flooding and the state has been declared an emergency. We're high on the hill and totally oblivious to the outside world, though we share their rain, which frankly, I am sick of. My mood is nothing short of foul.

Today is Transformational Therapy day for me. Linda takes me on a visualisation to introduce me to 'little Rachael'. She's been missing me because I haven't been paying attention or looking after her. More tears.

My sternum is sore from all this exposure of my heart and I lie down in the spa's relaxation room and its mammoth sleeping platform for some time out. I'm not missing food, though I've been sneaking extra Tahini Balls, carob slices and banana cake at afternoon tea. In fact I'm not missing anyone, I'm content to be amongst this group of strangers who have become my friends for this week anyway. Clearly my mood has lifted.

DAY FIVE

Hoorah for a break in the clouds. This morning we do a walk with Johnny Palmer, the resident botanist and comedien. When we reach the yoga deck at the hill peak we can see the floods in the plains below and the size of the waves in the ocean on the horizon. We may get flooded in. My heart chakra hurts some more at the thought so I lie down by the fire post breakfast and skip the lecture on functional movement. The afternoon floats by in a cloud of yin style yoga.

THIS PAGE: Taking some time out; Johnny Palmer, resident botanist; hiking the surrounding countryside. OPPOSITE PAGE: A Tai Chi class in the middle of nature; and stretching into a downward dog, all courtesy of Gwinganna.



DAY SIX

Today is my special day. An invitation is on my bed for my Signature Spa Ritual and I'm excited. The detox has been working, my head feels clearer and I am approaching the world wrapped in cotton wool thanks to all my 'inner work'. This is rare for me, my time at health retreats are usually spent working out as hard as I can in a bid to be the first to lose the most weight.

I arrive at the lush private spa villas on the edge of the property's billabong. Steven greets me and invites me into the alcove where we sit and he washes my feet. Bliss. We partake in a tea ceremony and a visualisation to help choose the different treatments I will experience over the next four hours. We start with a bath in Egyptian milk. I soak for fifteen minutes staring at the billabong's water and lush green edges. We move onto a body scrub of Himalayan salt before a tribal style mud wrap with a didgeridoo (don't ask). Then it's twenty minutes in the private steam room and the rain shower.

I'm crying, again. All this touch is overwhelming and it's only half way. I want it but I don't want it. It's been an emotionally exhausting week and instead of feeling abuzz with energy I just feel downright tired.

After an afternoon tea on the deck I enter a two-hour massage that is simply breathtaking. Kahuna Hawaiian style massage followed by hot stones, all set to music. Then a four-handed massage as another therapist steps in, a stomach massage and a holistic pulsing when I am wrapped up in cloth and pulsed like in the cradle. Yes, more tears. At some stage I float out and am served dinner in a private room to ease me gently back into the world.

I pass out.

DAY SEVEN

I can't speak. The four-hour treatment was so profound that I have totally settled deep into my body. It is physically impossible for me to raise my voice. I am totally grounded and centred; I have never felt this truly still and peaceful before. It feels good.

It's the last full day and I rip the last remaining layers off with another Transformational Therapy with Linda who does some role play with my family of origin. More tears but they're mopped up by Helen who completes my week the way she started it with warmth and nurturing love in the massage equivalent of one giant hug.

The rain continues.



THIS PAGE: Take some blissful time out in the spa.

DAY EIGHT

For once I'm not obsessed about how many kilos I've lost while detoxing and I'm no longer obsessed about whether a man likes me or not. I am, however, obsessed by the sun that is peaking through the clouds and my kaftan finally comes out, albeit for an hour.

It's departure day and I feel exposed, as though a layer of my skin has been removed and my nerves are there on the surface for everyone to play with. I know I am safe in the grounds of Gwinganna, but what about 'out there'? Thankfully I have two boxes of Tahini Balls for the flight and my first week home. I'm not fearful of whether my previous date turns into a second date or a third or none at all. Thanks to the work I've done I know I'm worthy and enough on my own. I also know vulnerability can be far more powerful and attractive than solid rock.

I fall into my bed upon my return and sleep solidly for twelve hours. The sign of a good week.

gwinganna lifestyle retreat

Seven-night Gwinganna Detox from US\$2,560 approx in a twin share heritage room including three massages and a facial, all meals, the lifestyle program and activities. www.gwinganna.com